“Classical liberalism” refers to a political philosophy in which liberty plays the central role. This book demonstrates a conceptual unity within the manifestations of classical liberalism by tracing the history of several interrelated and reinforcing themes. Concepts such as order, justice, rights, and freedom have imparted unity to this diverse political ideology by integrating context and meaning. However, they have also sparked conflict, as classical liberals split on a number of issues, such as legitimate exceptions to the “presumption of liberty,” the meaning of “the public good,” natural rights versus utilitarianism, the role of the state in education, and the rights of resistance and revolution. This book explores these conflicts and their implications for contemporary liberal and libertarian thought.

George H. Smith is an independent scholar and writes a weekly column for the Cato Institute’s Libertarianism.org titled “Excursions Into the History of Libertarian Thought.” He is the author of *Atheism: The Case Against God* (1974); *Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies* (1991); and audio series on “Great Political Thinkers,” “The Meaning of the U.S. Constitution,” and “The Ideas of Liberty.” His articles and book reviews have appeared in such publications as *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Reason*, *Liberty*, the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, *Free Inquiry*, and *The Humanist*. 
The System of Liberty

THEMES IN THE HISTORY OF
CLASSICAL LIBERALISM

GEORGE H. SMITH
To

Walter E. Grinder, to whom I owe more intellectual debts than I can ever repay

and

Treg Loyden, who believed in this book
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